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CASTRO: A LATIN-AMERICAN TYPE.

BY STEPHEN BONSAI.

THE rise of this uncouth adventurer from utter obscurity to a position where, as the events of the winter amply show, he is not only a menace to the development of South America but to the peace of the world, is a story upon which we may well ponder. It is not new, it is not unusual. Hardly a year passes but in one or the other of the so-called South-American republics a brigand chief proclaims himself Dictator, and by the automatic working of the Monroe Doctrine becomes our protégé before all the world. Among these adventurers Castro is distinguished by his undoubted courage and his undeniable ability. Unlike so many of the more common men of his stripe, he will never be contented with a residence in Paris and a calling acquaintance with the kings in exile and the refugee presidents that there abound. His ambition is real power and an authority not confined to Venezuela or to Colombia.

Five years ago, when the present Dictator was forty years of age, there were at least fifty self-styled Generals in the republic more prominent than he. Ignoring the etiquette of the revolutionary game, by assassinations, exiles and imprisonments he has thinned out the ranks of his competitors, and for the moment at least rules supreme over a subjugated people. In 1898 Castro was not only unknown, but his first essay in public life, as Senator to the Federal Congress from the Andine State of El Tachira, had been a failure. Little more is remembered of his appearance in the forum ten years ago than a personal idiosyncrasy. It is told of him that, when sitting down to his desk to draft a bill or engross a resolution he always took off his shoes and put on his black kid gloves, to the exquisite delight of the assemblage. Castro returned to the Andes with a great hatred of Cara-

cas, where he had been snubbed, and of the men of the Matos and Guzman Blanco school who have their clothes made in France and ape the manners of the *Mousius* (as all foreigners are called by the Venezuelan peons), by whom he had been ignored. But the only capital he brought back with him, a grievance against the metropolis, was a political asset by no means to be despised, when we regard the political conditions that then obtained in those beautiful Andine provinces of Trujillo, El Tachira, and Los Andes which rise to mountainous heights along the Colombian frontier. The Andinos, for a generation at least, had been unfairly taxed and grossly exploited by the politicians of the capital. Their lot had practically been that of taxation without representation, Governors, treasurers, and the higher federal officers being sent out to them from Caracas, while their representatives in Congress, as had been the fate of Castro, were ignored. There is no doubt that, but for the memory of this generation of oppression, the Andinos would not have supplied Castro with those sturdy mountaineers, those short-swordsmen who have proved so superior to the sons of the hot country in the sharp hand to hand conflicts which spell war in Venezuela.

Once returned to his own people, Castro resumed his usual life. He had a small ranch near San Cristóbal on the Colombian frontier, and in the height of the coffee season he was generally hired by German merchants as a sampler of the Maracaibo bean that is as aromatic as the Arabian coffee praised by the Prophet. Whenever anything of political importance happened in either Venezuela or Colombia, Castro put himself at his ease and wrote a letter about it. Some of these would prove profitable reading to-day in Washington, especially those written about the Guiana question and the revelations made in them as to the true motives of President Cleveland's intervention. Curiously enough, up to the very moment when his rapid rise to power began, Castro never could decide which should be the scene of his exploits, Venezuela or Colombia. It was an incident of the cattle trade, or, as some say, of cattle stealing, that cast the die in favor of Colombia, and he became a Venezuelan. It had been the immemorial custom among the frontiersmen to avoid the tax collector. When that obnoxious individual appeared on the Venezuelan side, Castro and the other worthy ranchmen drove their cattle into Colombia, and *vice versa*, but the day of reckoning came when the collectors of

the two countries conspired and appeared on the border at the same time. Castro's range was cleaned up by Venezuelan forces, and he, fighting for his own, narrowly escaped with his life. I say "for his own," though there is another story. Be this as it may, the herds were confiscated and Castro, having no other means of livelihood, raised the standard of revolt. He gave the affair a political coloring—and perhaps justly so—government as understood in Venezuela being simply a diplomatic discrimination among thieves, the fostering and the fattening of a chosen few, and the relentless pursuit of others who have neglected to placate the powers that be by a share in their plunder.

And now suddenly adverse Fortune became auspicious. Castro's neighbors rose like gudgeons or like cattle thieves, as some say they were, to the grandiloquent proclamation in which he declared a short-sword war against the outlander Government. Within a few weeks, his straw-shod companions having gained possession of the State capital, Castro was proclaimed president of the Andine province, and, circumstances favoring, he blossomed out as a prominent figure in federal politics. He was hardly seated in the saddle as dictator over the moss-troopers and border bushwhackers of El Tachira, before intimations reached him from Caracas suggesting possibilities far beyond his wildest dreams. Andrade was president; personally an honest and well-intentioned man, but singularly unpopular and inept, he had been in power some months striving for the right, and the moment had come to him, as it comes to every man who reaches the Yellow House, when it became apparent that he must either resign or pass over the real power, which means the right to plunder, to the military chieftains, without whose costly support it is impossible to rule in Venezuela under present conditions. Andrade hesitated and the military chieftains were hungry and furious; but Andrade had money, some of the best people in the land would support his cause with contributions, though never with their persons, yet as long as money was forthcoming fighting men could be procured from the Eastern States of the republic. Now, these Orientales are formidable in battle array. The Middle-Staters and the valley men, relaxed by the climate of the hot country, have a saying that the only troops who can face the men of the East are the sturdy Andinos of the West. Under these circumstances, the attention of the military chieftains naturally fell

upon Castro, endeared to the Andinos by his local successes. He was invited to march upon the federal capital, and assurances of support were given him. It is clear that the purpose of the military junta was simply to use Castro to expel Andrade, and then they reckoned upon having no difficulty in getting rid of such a penniless country lout.

It was an emprise that appealed to Castro's spirit of adventure, a gambler's stroke he could not resist. So, one fine morning, with but eighty men, he started out on his long ride. There followed months of wilderness fighting, of which little is known. Castro opened the jails as he advanced from the Colombian frontier, and every outlaw in the land made common cause with him. In the first meeting with the Andrade forces, a lieutenant of the latter, who is, I regret to say, a West Point man, turned the artillery upon his own infantry and so the battle was won. At last Castro turned up, with a broken leg and a dislocated shoulder, with six hundred hardy ruffians behind him, and sat down before Valencia, which Ferrer, now Minister of War, held with six thousand well-armed men at his command. He could have annihilated the Castro forces, but he did not like Andrade; and there was a conference, followed by what they call in the political parlance that there obtains a "transaction," which resulted in Ferrer going over to Castro with his whole army. The further journey eastward was prosecuted by the amalgamated forces with the new watchword, "God and the Federation," emblazoned upon their yellow banners. In due season, the pass of La Victoria, the key to the capital, the scene of so many stubbornly contested battles and of so many disgraceful "transactions," was reached. Here Mendoza was entrenched with a large army. Don Luciano is quite a character in Venezuelan politics. He is known as the Introducer of Presidents. He is a grizzled, venal, old war-horse, whose boast that he stays "bought" is not a mean one in view of the general behavior of his contemporaries. He also celebrated a conference with Castro and made his arrangements. He placed a special train at President Andrade's disposal and a leaky gunboat, and forty-eight hours' time to avail himself of both. When the clock struck the forty-ninth hour, true to his rôle and punctual to the minute, Don Luciano introduced the people of Caracas to their new President and Castro to his new home, the Yellow House.

Of the Dictator's life, once in the saddle, I am able to give only the most concise account here. Not a week passed before the members of the military junta awakened to the fact that, in pushing forward the unsophisticated savage from the Andes, they had brought to light one of the ablest and most unscrupulous of the many banditti that Venezuelan political life has produced. They have all long since paid the penalty of their imprudence. Of his private life, I will say nothing, except that the feudal lords of old claimed over the souls and bodies of their serfs no right which the Dictator does not exercise daily over the people of his unfortunate land. I must also note in passing the physical phenomenon that, despite the enervating debauchery in which his days and nights are spent, whenever the critical moment presents itself, Castro has up to the present been able to meet it with a clear mind and unflagging energy. He has surrounded himself with new men principally recruited from the Andine provinces, his old cronies and *compadres*, and with other stray adventurers, such as another Mendoza who obliged him with a mule on a certain stage of his adventurous ride, and who is now Secretary of the Treasury, and the stout barber of Valencia, a breezy gossip, who is at present the chief of the Dictator's military house. Whether it be the personal fascination of the man, as some say, or the dread he has always inspired by his bloody revenges, it is certain that those he has taken into his confidence have for the most part stood by him steadfastly in dark days as well as bright.

Now and again it is suggested that the United States Government, having been successful in persuading the Powers to desist from summary proceedings, should go a step further and endeavor to secure an abatement of their claims. It is maintained by those who hold this view, that Castro is a well meaning man anxious to pay to the uttermost farthing, but that his powers are constitutionally limited, and that the judiciary and the legislature of the land have to be counted with. These statements are all misleading, and many of them intentionally so. Perhaps it will be as well to state here the relations that actually do exist between the executive and the legislature; they are certainly not those contemplated by the constitution. In the course of the hundred and twenty revolutions with which the history of the republic is scarred, a number of so-called "elections" have taken place, but in no single instance have the citizens participated. The police-

men deposit the ballots as instructed, the Senators and the Members of the House being nominated by the military chief of the day. The President never confers with his cabinet or with the members of the legislative bodies. Last year, during the first session of the present Congress, it was pointed out to Castro that it would perhaps look better if, upon at least one occasion, the members of the *congreso* were welcomed to Miraflores. He accepted the suggestion, and the audience was fixed for a certain afternoon at two o'clock, the most "pernicious" hour, as the people of Caracas truly say, for calling. At the appointed time the men of the august body appeared. They stood around in groups for two long hours, at the end of which they were told that Castro did not propose to receive them.

Castro's relations with the Judiciary have been equally dictatorial. How likely the justices of the Supreme Court are to restrain his illegal acts, may appear from the following incident. In the fall of 1901, the Chief-Justice and his associates, in the performance of their duties as prescribed by law, made their annual visit to the Rotunda or general prison in Caracas. Among the other scandalous conditions which they brought to light, were the following: Over a hundred prisoners were in jail, held upon an executive order only, and not by due process of law. Of those who had been properly committed, two hundred were absent having bought their way out. The Chief-Justice, a worthy man who had been appointed by Andrade, proposed to demand an investigation, although none of his associates would sustain him. However, before he had taken any action, a paragraph revealing the conditions found appeared in "*El Pregonero*," a fugitive, truth-telling paper, long since suppressed. On the following morning, the tribunal was invaded by soldiers, and a military commissary declared the court dissolved. A few hours later, all the justices received a curt notice of their removal from office. Even the Bar of Caracas was aroused, and it was resolved that no member of the Bar Association should accept the posts that had been vacated in this summary manner; however, the necessary quota of scamps was secured, and the Supreme Court resumed business. It is to this tribunal, I may point out in passing, that the Powers declined to submit their claims, greatly arousing the ire of the American editor thereby, though at the same time they secured the approval of every American resident in Venezuela.

In the height of the excitement, there occurred an incident which shows conclusively how closely the Supreme Court is in touch with the political power. I feel all the more constrained to narrate this incident fully, because, owing to a widely circulated and misleading presentment of the facts, it has been most favorably commented upon. About this time, early in January, the American traders and merchants in Venezuela were heard from even in Washington. Their evidence was to the effect that one should submit to anything rather than go to court in Caracas. These statements produced uneasiness in Washington, which was communicated to Castro. Something had to be done, and this is what the Dictator decided to do. For ten years, there had been a claim made by a naturalized American against the Venezuelan Government for half a million dollars for damages caused by illegal cancellation of contract. The claimant was dead, and so was the claim, thought every one; but in this emergency Castro fished it up out of the dusty archives of the Supreme Court docket and in forty-eight hours the tribunal handed down a decision giving the claimant full damages. So imperious was the political necessity, however, that Castro cabled the decision to Washington twenty-four hours before it was rendered. While this act of righteousness has been widely praised in the United States, those acquainted with all the facts are now, if possible, more reluctant to appeal to Venezuelan justice than they were before the magnificent award was made.

It is quite true that many of the grievances and wrongs of which the Powers complain, and nearly all the debts under which the country groans and for which the foreigners ask payment, were incurred by Castro's predecessors. It is not true, however, that he never had a chance to pay, or the wherewithal to do it. By the singular fluke of fortune which I have outlined, Castro came into power under circumstances which were as enviable as they are unique in Venezuelan history. All the adventurers of his stripe are financed by the merchants of Curaçao or of Trinidad, who, as they take great risks, are not contented with small profits. Generally, when a revolutionist reaches the Yellow House, he finds that the resources of the country have been mortgaged for years to come. The Castro foray was not financed simply because his chances of success were deemed insignificant. The Andinos paid themselves at the expense of the people of Caracas, and

there were places enough and to spare for his few lieutenants. Within six months after his seizure of power, Castro had a surplus of many millions at his disposal; the use he made of them is significant. No attempt was made to meet any of the foreign claims, or to pay interest on those which had been adjudicated. When one remembers how badly they had fared when the treasury was full one may perhaps find the explanation of the attack that was made by the creditor nations upon the coffers last December when they were empty.

With the millions that rolled in from the custom-houses Castro equipped an army of eight thousand men, which he sent into Colombia, ostensibly to support one of the many adventurers who were fighting for the Presidency there. His real purpose was, of course, to secure such a strong position in the neighboring republic as to make it easy for him to impose the federation, which is only the first step in his dream of conquest. On this expedition he sent but few of his Andinos; these he needed at home. Artizans and laborers were torn from their families to fill up the necessary quota. A man went to his work in the morning and never returned. With banners flying and drums beating, the expedition started on the long road to Bogota. Once in Colombia they met with defeat and were compelled to fall back across the Guajira peninsula, a retreat which Castro may well call his Moskowa. Out of provisions, and struck down by sickness and poisoned arrows, harassed day and night by the Indians who infest the savage recesses of this land, who crucified every straggler or prisoner that fell into their hands, of the eight thousand who marched away so bravely only four hundred broken down men ever reached their native land again.

Despite this fiasco, Castro, believing as he does that his "star is greater than Napoleon's," has not given up his plan of conquest in Colombia. Large sums of money that would go far to pay the foreign debt are being used by him to debauch Colombian politicians, and to pay his spies. His friends in Bogotá to-day are not in a majority; but it is quite certain that all the influence he wields is being exerted against the ratification of the treaty under which we secure the privilege of cutting the Panama canal at our own expense. Curious whirligig of politics! Our protégé at Caracas is our opponent in Bogotá.

Of my personal experiences in camp and capital during the last

four months, while Venezuela was the cynosure of every eye, two scenes remain indelibly impressed upon my memory. I went to Puerto Cabello, that smiling haven near the Golfe Triste, a few days after the bombardment, filled with that indignation which swells the breasts of so many Americans whenever they hear that the cannon of the effete monarchies have been turned upon those moss-grown fortifications, behind whose protection we would believe that our South-American cousins are assiduously engaged in the cultivation of representative institutions. I went to blame; but, in view of the facts that were brought to my notice by many eye-witnesses of irreproachable character, I can only praise the English admiral for his moderation. The bombardment was provoked by the barbarous treatment, treatment that is simply untellable here, of the officers and men of the British merchant steamer "Topaze," not, as represented, at the hands of a low street-rabble, such as might in a moment of excitement get the upper hand in any port town the world over, but of officials and soldiers wearing the Venezuelan uniform and Castro's yellow ribbon. Times have changed since the stalwart days when England fought all the world because of Captain Jenkins's missing ear; but I am of the opinion that, if the exact facts as to the treatment of the men of the "Topaze" were known in London, public opinion would not permit Lord Lansdowne to sign milk-and-water protocols with the Power that permits such atrocities, even though thereby England escapes from the unpopular and unwise course which her common action with Germany in South-American affairs has entailed.

I was standing by the sea wall, in the square upon which each succeeding flight of adventurers are accustomed to engrave in golden letters the natal day of their government, and which the people of the port, to avoid confusion, call simply the Place of the Revolution once for all. Two old gentlemen in threadbare frock coats joined me, and together we looked across the turquoise waters of the strait to where the Fort of the Liberator lay in ruins. Its walls were breached, its guns dismounted. There, before us, all the secrets of the castle which, named in honor of the Liberator, had in reality served as a place of political bondage, were laid bare. The soft languorous winds blew through the stifling galleries where many a man had died the most horrible of lingering deaths; the blessed sunlight, at first timidly it seemed,

crept into the damp and noisome places, and revealed to us the heavy inquisitorial chains which the prisoners had borne by day and by night. Suddenly, the more elderly of my unknown companions raised his hat and turned away. His eyes rested upon the line of blockading vessels, and then he lifted up his arms like some prophet of old. I expected to hear a denunciation of the modern vandals such as is daily printed in the official press, and I could not have believed my ears had he not repeated his statement so many times: "Blessed, blessed be the strangers!" he said, "for they have taken pity upon us and destroyed our Bas-tille." And then the old gentlemen, embracing one another, hobbled away. One of them, as I afterwards learned, had spent ten years of his life in the dungeon. The son of the other had been done to death there at Castro's command. I do not mean to say that the sentiments which they expressed are those of a majority of the people; but I am entirely convinced that they are those of a large and most respectable minority.

Many men, with whose views I am generally in agreement, have stated that in South America they never heard a word of praise of the Monroe Doctrine, whether from native-born or immigrant. This was also my own experience except on one occasion, and I do not care to accept the responsibility of suppressing either the names or the circumstances connected with the incident. After years of patient diplomacy, finding all their efforts to obtain justice and reparation for wrongs done their nationals of no avail, when I reached Venezuela stern measures of coercion had been adopted by three of the leading World Powers. The coast was blockaded; and, in the port towns, fifty per cent. of the improvident population was already face to face with starvation. In Caracas, generally so rich and opulent, there was also suffering. The capital was not only cut off from the outside world by the foreign squadrons, but the rich back-country, whence provisions are drawn in ordinary times, was in the hands of the Revolution. The diplomatic problem that confronted Venezuela was involved, the domestic situation was simply appalling. "And where is Castro?" I asked, "that sturdy American who would not bend the knee to European oppression, as the papers say." Well, he was away on a "picnic," I learned, at La Victoria. He would spend a week there, in debauchery, the tongue of scandal (as I then thought) whispered. Only half believing, I followed the

trail of the Dictator down to the orange groves on the border of the *tierra caliente*. There I found him guarded by his soldiers, surrounded by the Yellow House gang composed of debauched and dishonored men and outcast women—his only willing associates. It was a sharp transition. I had come from where thousands were starving to a camp where champagne was flowing like water, where the extravagant saturnalia continued day and night, though only a few yards away lay the unburied bodies of the stolid, ignorant Andinos who had died but a few weeks before to keep the Dictator on his throne.

I did not succeed in concealing, nor did I very much try to conceal, my astonishment at the scenes which met my eye. I had certainly thought to find our ally otherwise engaged. "But why should you wonder?" said Castro, noting my surprise. "Our part is played. We have picked the quarrel, and now, blessed be the Monroe Doctrine, our rôle is finished and the fighting must be done by *el tio Samuel*. All the papers in the case I have given to your minister, who goes to Washington as my attorney." "Yes, *viva la Doctrina 'Monroey'!*" exclaimed Tello Mendoza, the witty muleteer whom Castro has made Secretary of the Treasury. "It spares us sleepless nights and gives us time for *bailes*."

Well may they call it blessed, the Monroe Doctrine! It is better for them than an army with banners, because it never requires either black beans or straw shoes, and it is more serviceable than a squadron of battle-ships because it never gets out of repair.

In 1826, the Congress of the United States passed a resolution *à propos* of the Panama Conference. In it the opinion was expressed that the United States ought not to form any alliance with all or any of the South-American republics, that the people of the United States should be left free to act in any crisis in such manner as their feelings of friendship toward their sister republics and as their honor and policy might at the time dictate.

This is statesmanship; this is the American policy. The Secretary of State who will endow it with the breath of life will conserve our interests and dispel the most threatening cloud upon our future. The man who will do this will deserve well of the people of North America, and rescue the people of South America from a despotism to which there is nothing comparable in the history of the Holy Alliance or the House of Bourbon.

STEPHEN BONSAI.